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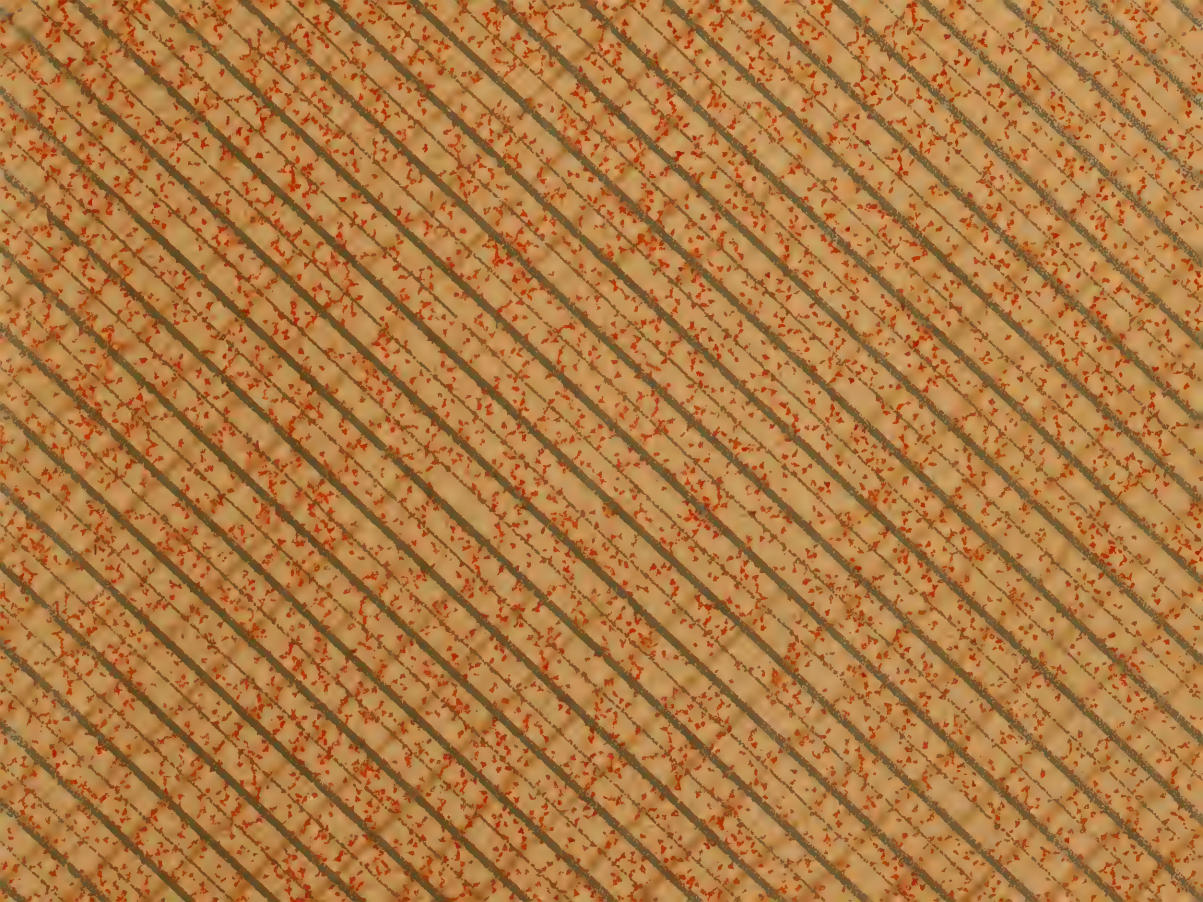

NICODEMUS

BY

GRACE SHAW DUFF

Illustrated by FREDERICK C. GORDON

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I.

ND now was come that last great day of the feast;
The golden glory of a rising sun
Decked roof and dome, and edged with lustrous line
The gently swaying palms. Some slanting rays
The hillside caught, to weave in spectrum looms
Bright broidered vestments for the pale myrtle
And fragrant citron flower. The modest moon,
Intent on flight, had left some shreds of mist
With which she had draped her silver horn; this
Bolder orb, with small regard for others'
Gaze, swept first the valley clear, then poured
His wealth of blazing light down Kedron's plain.

II.

THE long white road made here and there a turn
To shun a jutting slope, or join itself
To share awhile the river's graceful curve,
Then stretched its dusty way toward Bethany.
Some early comers gathered to the feast,
Kinsfolk and friends, and came with reverent minds
And faithful hearts to pay again their sacred vows.
The men discussed at length the olive yield
And what perchance might prove success or no
In some new venture to enrich the vine;
While mothers backward turned, content to fit
Their lingering steps to pace of little feet.

III.

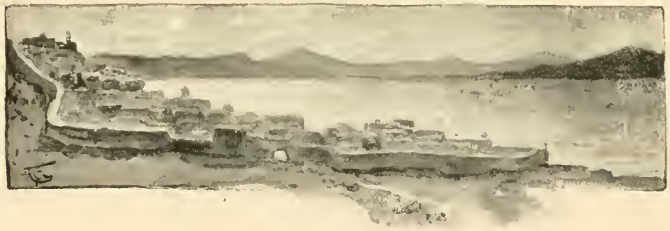
ITHIN the city's walls unusual stir
Begins, to meet the day's unusual need.
Long lines of furbished booths a jarring mass
Of color make, while awnings move like wings
Of huge bright birds that ne'er alight. Some pens
Hold tethered lambs that patient wait beside
Their dams their unknown fate to meet. Distinct
From harsher cries, one hears the soft round sound
Of cooing doves whose gentle lives will end
In fitting death — as ransom for our sins.

IV.

MOTLEY crowd that fills the streets and squares
Awaits the Levites' call. The strong bring out
Their maimed and halt, and haste to claim for them
An upper place upon the Temple steps,
And there, with artful skill, to well dispose
Their loathsome charms; while in and out the crowd
The busy venders hawk unsavory wares
Or meet with ready wit some idle jest;
Some graver men exchange more earnest thought,
And question if the Nazarene will speak
To-day; or tell with awe some wondrous sign
The man has done to fit his wondrous words.

V.

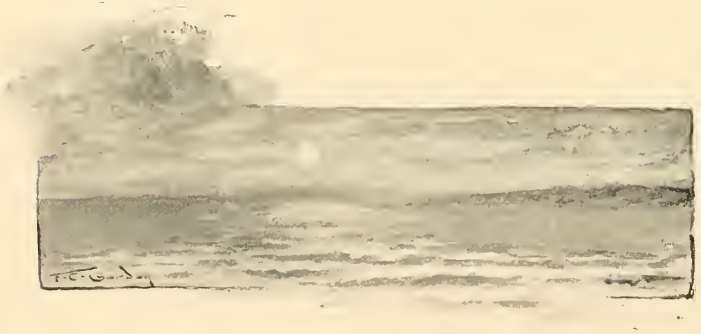
FOR months he has roamed the Galilean towns
And taught the people there, and healed their sick,
And even back to life called some that died!—
At least so runs the tale. He earns his bread
In sweat of daily toil, and still, they say,
He claims to be the Christ! — of course 'tis false,
For when Messiah comes, He'll come as King.
And yet 'tis strange what gives the man his power



VI.

NE night from sleepless bed I rose, and went
To where he lodged, and bade the porter say
One Nicodemus — ruler — came, and speech
Would have with him. There was no moon, but hosts
Of stars, and soft, pale glow from shaded lamps
Made silver light. The air was still, with just
Enough of life to waft at times a faint
Sweet oleander scent, and gently float
Some loosened petals down. I heard no sound,
But sudden knew another presence near,

And turned to where he stood: one hand held back
The curtain's fold; the other clasped a roll.
No king could gently bear a prouder mien;
And when I gracious rose to offer meet
Respect to one whose words had won for him
Regard, I strangely felt like loyal slave,
And almost . . . "Master!" trembled on my lips
A deep, brave look shone in his eyes, as if
He saw the whole of mankind's needs, yet dared
To bid him hope, and when he spoke, his words
And voice seem fitted parts of some great psalm.



VII.

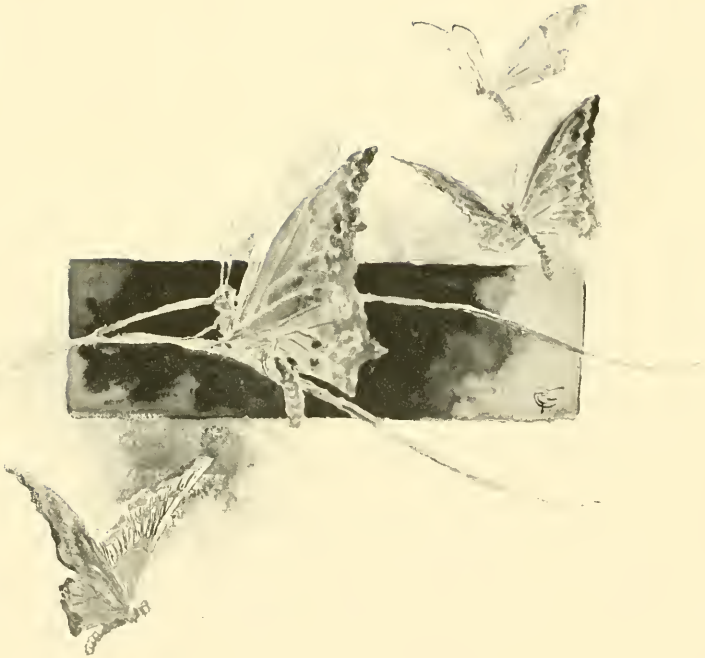
AT midnight, once I saw the sea; each wave
Uplifted on its crest a silver moon
Which made the hollows deeper seem; far off
In rhythmic measure, 'long the shore, I heard
The billows die away. His eyes, His voice.
That midnight sea of liquid moons, with deep,
Low music in its lapsing waves, since then
A single picture in my memory make.

VIII.

THE throng soon crowded through the Temple gates.
I followed too, and thought, perchance I'll see
Those eyes and hear that voice again. Thick clouds
Of incense rise and wrap their vaprous folds
Around the frieze and through the vaulted dome,
While blasts of silver horns make quiver all
The heated air; long lines of priests attend
In turn the altar's sacred fire, or pour
Libations on the steaming pile. The men
Unceasing wave their myrtle boughs, and hold
Aloft "the fruit of goodly trees," while priests
And Levites antiphone the psalm; then all
The people join the Hallel's words, and end
The chant in one tremendous burst of praise.

IX.

WAS then he spoke. I heard that voice again.
The Temple hushed its sounds to listen too.
Like forest trees whose leaves expectant hang
And wait the coming breeze, the people stood
To catch his words. Our father's God, long past
By Moses spake, and down through all these years
The Law has been reproof and guide — reproof
For deeds undone, and guide for deeds to come.
But this man knew the thirst that parched men's lives,
A thirst the Law could not assuage. His words,
Tho' strange, seemed true, and somewhere in my heart
I felt a stir of newer life — and still
Perhaps not new, so much as very old.



X.

OME closer pressed, as if his burning words
Found ready welcome in their waiting hearts.
The old that slumbered there awoke to meet
Its risen self, alive in newer form,
Like moths who feel their new-unfolded wings
Outspread upon the buoyant air, and think
A new creation marks the summer day.
'Tis true the wings that skyward mount are new
The power is old that bids the wings to fly.

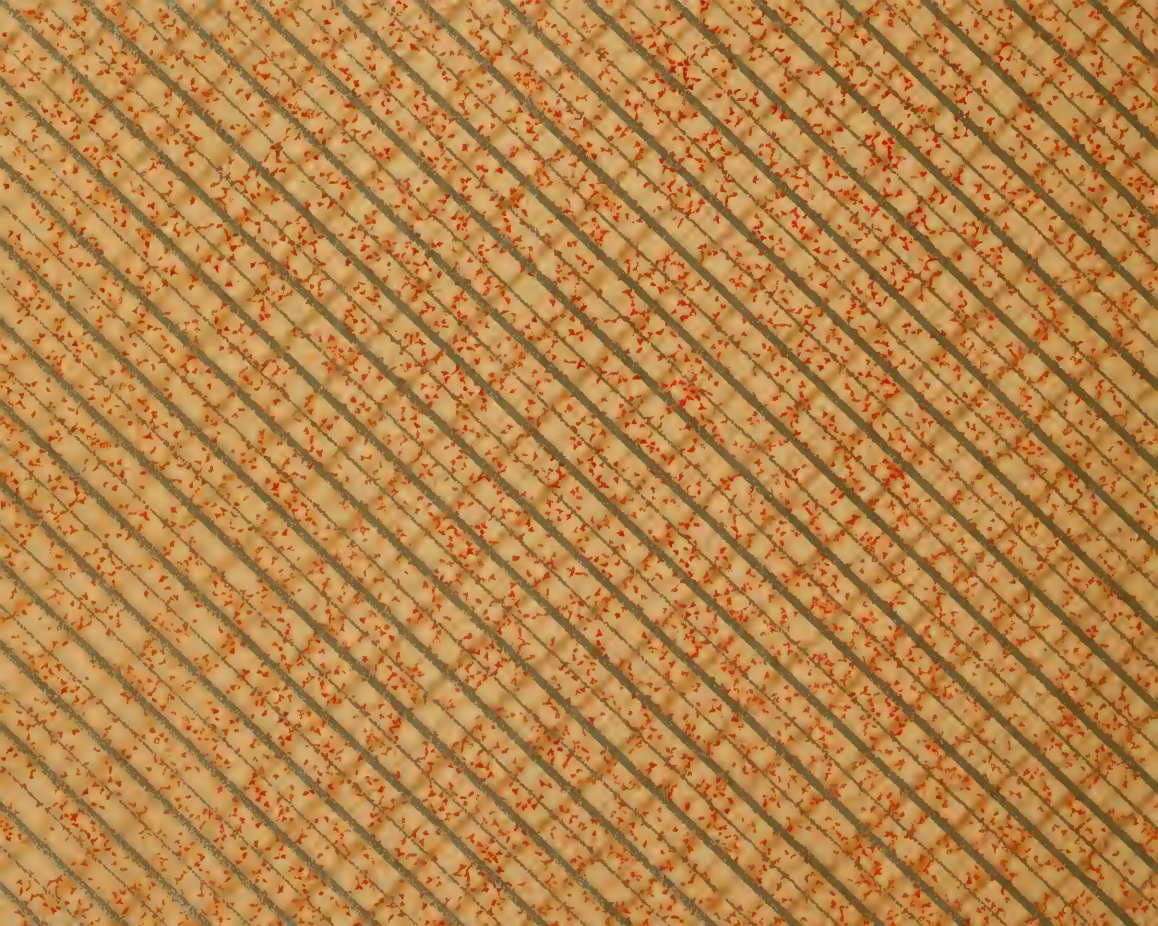
XI.

OT many words he spoke, nor lingered long,
For soon among the crowd some murmuring
Voices broke the spell, and pushing toward him
Came the guard to drag him thence; but by
Them all he calmly walked, and out the gate,
And no man stayed his way. But as he turned
I looked again into his eyes, and in
Their depths my soul met his — and then I knew
In very truth — He was the Son of God.

* * * *

XII.

WE have a law that none be judged to death
Before himself has pled his cause. That day
I begged the counsel call the Nazarene;
The claim he made should win at least respect.
Alas! my words had little use, at least
For him. For me they seemed the first faint breath
With which the spirit's born. He said 'twas like
The wind, it came and went, and no man knew
From whence or where. I left the council hall
With deep, exultant hope that what he said
Was true — and heeded not their taunting cry:
"Go search and see,
No prophet comes from Galilee."



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